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Keeping Secrets

DEFENSE FOCUS/MICHAEL R. GORDON

When the Walker spy case burst into the headlines, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger ordered that the number of Pentagon security clearances be immediately reduced by 10 per cent. That suggestion drew attention to an often overlooked point. The dimensions of the national security establishment are more vast than generally realized. It is estimated that 4.3 million military personnel and civilians have some sort of security clearance. Within that group, about 164,000 people have signed agreements that give them access to Sensitive Compartmented Information, which is at the highest classification level.

This fact and other details come from Jeffrey T. Richelson's recent book, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (Ballinger, 1985). The unemotional style of the book contrasts with much of the breathless reporting on the Walker case. And unlike some other books on intelligence, one cannot easily extract a strong political moral from Richelson's web of detail. But that is one of the book's strong points. In the area of national security writing, reliable information is scarce.

Moreover, Richelson raises issues concerning secrecy and the use of intelligence information that are of special importance given the daily drumbeat of headlines about the Walker spy saga. As a result of that controversy, it would hardly be surprising if the public favored the broadened use of classification procedures. In his understated way, Richelson makes the opposite point—that the classification of government information may have gone too far, thus adding to the burden of keeping secrets.

To much of the public, the world of intelligence conjures up images of the CIA and, perhaps, the Defense Intelligence Agency. Some specialists may also be familiar with the National Reconnaissance Office, which manages U.S. satellite surveillance programs. The existence of the reconnaissance office is still not officially acknowledged but is generally known to those who follow national security issues.

But Richelson, an assistant professor of government at the American University in Washington, usefully shows that the intelligence community is far more diverse and outlines the vast scope of its efforts. Civilian intelligence organizations are abundant. The Treasury Department, for example, maintains an Office of Intelligence Support, which collects information on Middle East developments, from terrorism to international investment. And the State, Energy and Agriculture Departments also have intelligence offices.

In addition to tracing the basic anatomy of the intelligence system, Richelson provides an informative history of satellite surveillance programs, which puts into perspective the recent controversy over press coverage of the launching of a SIGINT (signals intelligence) satellite from the space shuttle. (*See NJ, 2/16/85, p. 360.*) Developments in that field of satellite technology thankfully have erased the need for the sort of provocative flights that the United States carried out over Soviet territory in the 1950s and 1960s. In recent years, it has become known that there were more of those missions than previously realized. According to 1960 CIA congressional testimony that was declassified two years ago, a CIA aircraft with a crew of eight or nine went down in the Caucasus, a mountain range in Russia, in the late 1950s, Richelson reports.

But intelligence actions close to Soviet territory are not a thing of the past. Citing "private information," Richelson states that the Caron, a destroyer equipped with electronic intelligence gear, was 14 miles off the coast of Gdansk in August 1980, when Poland was shaken by the Solidarity movement.

"During a North Atlantic cruise, she came as close to the Soviet naval base at Murmansk as the Chesapeake Bay Bridge is to the U.S. Naval Base at Norfolk, Virginia," he writes.

With the Walker affair in the headlines, efforts to clamp down on national security information may receive more support. Prior to that case, the Reagan Administration had already taken action in this area, encouraging more classification.

The press and the academic community, of course, have a vested interest in access to sensitive information. But the question may fairly be raised whether the government is too restrictive. In his book, Richelson asks, should the National Aeronautic and Space Administration exempt from its public reports information on satellite orbits that is available to diplomats at the United Nations?

"When the letterhead of the NRO (National Reconnaissance Office) is classified secret, it is hard to take the classification system seriously," Richelson writes in one of his rare criticisms of the intelligence system. It is unlikely that concern over excessive secrecy will figure in Administration policy reviews that follow from the Walker case. But if sweeping changes are in order, this would seem to be an appropriate time to give the issue attention.